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Michael Rose: The Representation of Future Generations in Today's Democracy: Theory and Practice of Proxy Representation

Reviewed by Jonathan M. Hoffmann

Michael Rose's *Zukünftige Generationen in der heutigen Demokratie: Theorie und Praxis der Proxy-Repräsentation* (Future Generations in Today's Democracy: Theory and Practice of Proxy Representation) is an ambitious and fascinating work. It provides a new conceptualisation of the representation of future generations and it also delivers the most extensive empirical study of institutions for the representation of future generations available to date. The book is based on Rose's PhD thesis at the Heinrich Heine University, Düsseldorf, Germany, and is 516 pages long (excluding an extensive bibliography, list of sources and appendices). A third of the thesis is devoted to short case studies of a total of 29 institutions which are presented in a catalogue format, allowing this section to be used as an encyclopaedia. The book is written concisely and is well documented throughout.

The book makes contributions to both the theoretical as well as empirical study of the representation of future generations. This review begins with an overview of Rose's contribution to the conceptualisation of the representation of future generations. Then I turn to his discussion of the Münchhausen Problem of Motivation. Following this, I review his qualitative comparative

analysis of institutions for the representation of future generations and conclude with a few critical and lauding paragraphs.

Conceptualising the representation of future generations

Rose begins his book with a consideration of the justification of the representation of future generations. He argues that the all affected principle is an appropriate basis for such a justification and he provides reasons for a causal interpretation (instead of a legal interpretation) of the principle. Having shown that the all affected principle provides grounds for the inclusion of future generations in current democracies, Rose reviews the discourse on representative theory in a structured and clear manner. His aim is to check whether any of the readily available conceptions of political representation can be fruitfully discussed with regard to the representation of future generations. He finds that none of the "standard" conceptions are able to deal with future generations as (non-available) constituents. More promising conceptions of representation are discovered in the representative turn literature, such as Michael Saward's theory of representative claims (Saward 2010) and Andrew Rehfeld's general theory of political representation (Rehfeld 2006). On account of the process character of Saward's work, Rose gives preference to Rehfeld's theory as a basis for his own theory of "proxy representation". Thus, Rose's contribution can be understood as a subcategory of Rehfeld's theory of representation.

The function of proxy representation, according to Rose, is to "make future generations present in today's political decision process, thus to bring forth their interests there" (128, my translation). The function of proxy representation provides the conceptual basis for further elaboration. Rose finds that there are three requirements for proxy representation. There needs to be (a) an agent, (b) access to the political decision process, and (c) acceptance of the task through the agent. It is the task of the proxy to identify the relevant interest of future generations and to represent these in adequate ways in the political decision process.

As both accountability and authorisation are not available as measures to ensure the legitimacy of representation with regard to future generations, proxy representation must rely on alternative instruments for the production of legitimacy. Rose dismisses Saward's idea of ex-post legitimisation through the constituents, as future generations are not able to hold their representatives responsible, even in the long run. Instead, Rose suggests thinking of proxy representations as a form of democratic self-commitment. Thus, Rose (158, my translation) writes that "[p]roxies are legitimised democratically, therefore, paradoxically on the one hand through the authorisation of the political-administrative system, which is expressed through the access to the political decision process, and, on the other hand, not being responsible to the governing majority, of whose recognition it is depended, but through being obligated to future generations." As the representatives of future generations cannot be held responsible by their constituents, Rose argues that this should also be done by surrogates such as other political actors or the media. He admits that the legitimacy of proxy representation will always be deficient in comparison to standard accounts of representation but argues that proxy representation is normatively required as there is no viable alternative (162).

The Münchhausen Problem of Motivation

In the second part of the theoretical half of his thesis, Rose discusses the Münchhausen Problem of Motivation (Jensen 2015; Kates 2015). Jensen (2015: 541) defines it as follows: "We start out from the observation that the present generation tends not to take the interests of future generations sufficiently into account. But the same generation is supposed to reform democracy and appoint representatives of future generations. So how should their preferences be changed in a less short term direction?"

Little attention has been given to this problem in the discourse of institutions for future generations. One solution is described by Kates (2015). While it may sometimes not be possible to install an institution for future generations directly due to the short-term focus of the political system, it may still be possible to reform the political system in such a way that it becomes less presentistic and, therefore, more attentive to future generations' issues.

Rose evaluates the validity of Kates' argument for an iterative approach to the reform of the political system towards the long term. He develops a set of circumstances that could be enabling (or constraining) to the implementation of institutions for the representation for future generations. Among these are political variables, such as number of parties in a government (single vs multi-party government), a left-wing government (vs a right-wing government) and low institutional path dependency (measured in number of changes to the constitution in the last years, vs few and bygone changes to the constitution), economic variables such as above-average economic growth (vs lower rates of economic growth) and a low rate of unemployment (vs higher rates) and, lastly, a cultural variable, namely the prevalence of emancipative values in society (vs a low level of such values in society).

A comparative analysis of institutions for the representation of future generations

The short case studies, of usually three to five pages, contain not only well-known candidates like the Hungarian Ombudsman for Future Generations and the Israeli Commissioner for Future Generations, but also a wide array of less-known institutions like sustainability tests in southern Germany, and various consultative sustainability councils. At the beginning of each case study, Rose provides a table with key details such as the institution's potential impact, its channel(s) to the political system, date of installation and legal foundation and the political instruments of the institution. This allows this chapter to be used as a compendium of institutions. Rose assigns each institution a potential impact level. These range from high impact (Hungarian Ombudsman), to moderately high impact (Israeli Commissioner and Future Generations Commissioner for Wales), institutions with hard power instruments to low and very low potential impact (e.g. British Strategy for Sustainability and German Council for Sustainable Development), and institutions that only have soft power instruments in their repertoire.

Providing a detailed set of qualitative comparative analyses, Rose is able to test the impact of the above mentioned circumstantial variables on the implementation of institutions for the future. Rose compares the circumstantial variables at the point of implementation of high and moderately high potential impact institutions (such as the Hungarian Ombudsman) with the circumstantial variables of those institutions that have been assigned a lower potential impact level (e.g. the interdepartmental committee for

Sustainable Development in Switzerland). He finds that none of these circumstances had a generalisable constraining or enabling effect on the implementation of high impact institutions of future generations. Further, the absence of presumably positive circumstances such as a high increase in GDP, a high employment rate or a high level of emancipative values prove to be no hindrance to the implementation of institutions for the future in general. Many of these institutions have been implemented, albeit presumably enabling circumstances were *not* a given. "[T]he implementation of proxies with large impact potential does therefore not need good circumstances, it is also possible under dire political-institutional, economic and cultural circumstances" (477, my translation). Accordingly, Rose suggests that where low or very low potential impact institutions have been installed, circumstances could also have allowed a more powerful institution to be founded.

Critical Appraisal

I want to make two critical points regarding Rose's justification for the concept of proxy representation before I turn to some appraisal.

Rose is right in addressing the gap in the representation literature. Moreover, his concept seems appropriate for the purpose. The first point concerns the (lack of) legitimacy of proxy representation. Rose's argument relies on the all affected principle in order to justify the implementation of institutions for the representation of future generation. However, he takes little care to explain how "being affected" translates into the right to be politically involved in some way. If we take future generations as political equals, it would follow that future generations would be in a majority or should even have an "overwhelming vote, or even a veto, because of the magnitude of future needs and numbers" (Attfield 2003: 130). Furthermore, we should represent, as Goodin (2007) points out, not only those who will actually be affected as part of the *demos*, but also all those who *could* be affected. In the case of future generations, this results in a very large *demos* of unknown size that could even be infinite. The representation of all those possible future people seems an overburdening task for any institution.

A second point I want to make here concerns the interests of future generations and the according obligations of the institutions representing them. According to Rose, these interests are not known to us, apart from those that generally follow from the human condition. He argues that it remains for the institutions themselves to comprehend the interests of future generations. While it seems plausible that a general theory of proxy representation cannot provide us with the details of future generations' interests, it would have been worthwhile to consider more closely how this could be done by the institutions in question. One problem that Rose only briefly mentions is the plurality of future generations' interests (Bovenkerk 2015: 508-511). The distribution of future generations in time and also space (who says that future generations are bound by the same nation states as we are?) may result in conflicting interests across generations. Furthermore, the interests of future generations are "moving targets" (Karnein 2016: 87). As such, our political decisions influence the interests that future generations will have. As Rose rightly remarks, the representation of future generations will often result in a higher consideration of future generations (instead of a full representation of their preferences). However, if raising the consideration of future generations is the main objective of proxy representation, we may ask with Karsten Klint Jensen (2015) whether we should not try to raise their consideration directly and cut out the detour through representation theory.

Now to the praise. Rose delivers first insights on the (non-) constraining effects of political and economic circumstances on the implementation of institutions for the future on an empirical basis. Such studies are timely, as most discussions of such institutions and proposals for such institutions have so far only worked with plausible but untested assumptions regarding feasibility (if they discuss this issue at all). More work is needed here to better understand what actually made the implementation of these institutions for future generations possible and what caused some of these institutions to be disbanded relatively shortly after their implementation. Thus, I hope that Rose's work will initiate further discussions and research in the political sciences, as further work in this vein is needed very much and has been lacking hitherto.

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